
From Desert One to Southern Watch: **The Evolution of U.S. Central Command**

By JAY E. HINES

Following World War II, the United States assumed a global leadership role. The nations in what comprises the area of responsibility of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) were viewed through the prism of the Cold War, with policies focused on denying turf and resources, including the oil of the Middle East, to the Soviet Union. After the British withdrew from east of the Suez in 1967, the United States depended on Iran and Saudi Arabia to promote peace and ensure stability within the region. This approach received added impetus under the Nixon Doctrine, which called on both friends and allies in the region to counter threats within a Cold War context.

This strategy began to unravel in 1979 when the hostage crisis in Iran and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan raised doubt about America's ability to honor commitments to friendly Arab states and Israel, as well as secure access to resources of the Arabian Gulf. In January 1980 President Jimmy

Carter proclaimed that any outside attempt to gain control over the region would be taken as an assault on vital national interests. To enforce the Carter Doctrine, the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) was established in March 1980.

Early Years

At first RDJTF was subordinate to U.S. Readiness Command (REDCOM), located since 1972 at MacDill Air Force Base and the successor to U.S. Strike Command (STRICOM). STRICOM was activated during the Kennedy administration in 1962. Among its missions was joint planning of operations in the Middle East, Africa (south of the Sahara), and South Asia (MEAFSA). Because of concern expressed by the Department of State about African reactions to the title of Commander in Chief, U.S. Strike Command (CINC-STRIKE), DOD assigned the added title of Commander in Chief, Middle East, Africa, and South Asia (CINCMEAFSA).

With an area of responsibility halfway around the world, it was difficult for CINCSTRIKE to carry out his mission as CINCMEAFSA. When military operations were conducted in the area, U.S. European Command

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(EUCOM) and its components provided operational forces and support which could be delivered more rapidly than assets assigned to CINCMEAFSA.

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This was the case in the Congo rescue mission of 1964, evacuation of Americans from Libya and Jordan during the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, and exercises sponsored by the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).

The MEAFSA mission was lost when REDCOM replaced STRICOM. This accorded with the Nixon Doctrine of gradual disengagement from Third World conflicts. The responsibilities of CINCMEAFSA were divided between

EUCOM and U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), and parts of the Indian Ocean bordering Africa were retained by U.S. Atlantic Command. EUCOM, which already had responsibility for North Africa, now inherited an area that extended as far as Iran. The PACOM region stretched to Pakistan and included the northern Indian Ocean, but not the Red Sea or Arabian Gulf. In 1976, this area was expanded to encompass the entire Indian Ocean.

In the wake of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Chairman proposed establishing a mobile joint task force (JTF) to deal with distant crises, but the concept did not immediately gain support. After an initial review, the Carter administration issued Presidential Directive (PD) 18 in August 1977, which recommended forming a new quick reaction force. But no funding was provided.

The National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, spoke of a crescent of crisis reaching from Somalia to Pakistan. Two events in late 1979 fundamentally changed attitudes on the region. The Ayatollah Komeini displaced the Shah of Iran, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. A few months later, in March 1980, RDJTF was established. Then the hostage crisis in Tehran led to the severing of diplomatic relations with Iran and the aborted mission to rescue the American hostages. Although these events took place in the RDJTF area of responsibility, this mission was not conducted by the new command.

Enter CENTCOM

The activation of RDJTF was another attempt to solve the vexing geostrategic problems of the previous three decades. This organization had

Aftermath of war, 1991.



Medical civic action in Somalia, Restore Hope.



to contend with the same difficulties that had plagued its predecessors: long lines of communication, lack of regional bases and forward-based assets, and poor understanding of local conditions. Additional problems were insufficient forces, inadequate funding, and overlapping command responsibilities. To finally solve these problems the Reagan administration converted the ad hoc RDJTF into a permanent unified command. As the first step RDJTF became a separate JTF in October 1981, no longer subordinate to REDCOM, and its region was more precisely defined and included Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia as well as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, People's Republic of Yemen, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen Arab Republic.

Despite the fact that CENTCOM evolved from RDJTF, the commands were fundamentally different. By definition, JTFs are temporary organizations established by the Secretary of Defense for specific purposes. When RDJTF was formed in 1980, it was regarded as a temporary solution to project U.S. power across the Middle East and East Africa. With the Reagan administration, it was organized as a permanent unified command for the region, under a plan that called for the orderly transition over the next two years.

When CENTCOM was activated in January 1983, Jordan, the Red Sea, and Arabian Gulf were included in its area. The first Commander in Chief, U.S. Central Command (CINCCENT), General Robert Kingston, USA, was tasked to institute a bona fide unified command and credible force in response to critics who derided RDJTF as not being either rapid or deployable or much of a force. He insisted on having component forces assigned to the command, not the notional forces that have characterized RDJTF. Overcoming initial skepticism by EUCOM, which had a headquarters and available forces much closer to the region, Kingston maintained that CENTCOM was a full-fledged unified command in the same sense as others, notwithstanding the fact that its headquarters was geographically distant. Security assistance operations, its most important financial tool



General Schwarzkopf during Desert Storm.

DOO

for influencing regional military establishments, had to be delayed at EUCOM insistence until the next fiscal year. Similar difficulties postponed the takeover by the Air Force component of the local airborne warning and control system (AWACS) from EUCOM.

When General George Crist, USMC, assumed command in November 1985, he noted that CENTCOM was a unified command in name only. In most quarters, he believed it was seen as "an RDJTF whose sole purpose was to go to Iran and wage World War III against the Russians in a conflict restricted solely to our theater of operations." Crist found that such thinking permeated official views on all levels but failed to take into account the necessity for bilateral consultations with individual countries within the CENTCOM area of responsibility. Moreover, the command was regarded by many nations in the region as "little more than a major intervention force designed to operate solely for U.S. purposes without their consultation or participation." Even worse, the new CINC thought that his command was seen as a pariah by most agencies with

vested interests in the area, including the Departments of State and Defense.

To counter any perception that CENTCOM was inimical to the interests of countries in the region, Crist set out to convince local leaders that the command sought the support of key nations without "gang-pressing them into actions contrary to their perceived self-interest." Invoking the Nixon Doctrine, he emphasized that the command was "there to provide them with capabilities that would allow them to stand on their own two feet and, if necessary, to defend their territorial integrity against local or regional threats to their security." He also wanted to convince them of the ability of the United States "to deal with threats beyond their ability to respond."

The Gulf War

The Iran-Iraq war severely tested Crist's vision. It threatened to spread and destabilize the entire region. In May 1987 the United States was drawn into the conflict when missiles fired by Iraq struck *USS Stark*, killing 37 sailors. As the conflict intensified, Washington sought to ensure safe passage by neutral shipping through the Straits of Hormuz, leading to one of the first combat operations conducted by CENTCOM.

CENTCOM Exercise Program

The largest exercise is Bright Star, which occurs biannually. The last iteration took place in October and November 1999 and was the most significant coalition military exercise ever mounted as well as the largest-scale deployment/employment drill in the area of responsibility (outside of the Arabian Gulf). It included more than 70,000 troops from the United States and nine other nations—five members of NATO, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates—and utilized a computer-aided command post exercise and joint field training exercise in Egypt.

In the Arabian Gulf region, CENTCOM holds exercises such as Eagle Resolve in Bahrain, an annual JCJS-sponsored event that helps the command and military leaders of member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council promote cooperative defense against weapons of mass destruction. Although closely related to other activities, Neon Falcon, which is also held in Bahrain, focuses on chemical, biological, and radiological defense for naval, naval air, and Special Operations Forces. British and French units as well as U.S. and Bahrain forces participated in Neon Falcon '00 which included a field training exercise to refine operational tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Several exercises held in the United States also benefit CENTCOM capabilities. Blue Flag, conducted by CENTAF, is a framework for command staff, components, and coalition partners to refine warfighting skills and build joint and combined teams. The primary goal of Blue Flag '00 at Hurlburt Field, Florida, in March 2000 was the execution of a theater campaign in Southwest Asia. The purpose of Internal Look is similar, but is centered on CENTCOM itself rather than CENTAF. From CENTCOM headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base, it allows both staff and components to practice operational planning and execution for a simulated theater campaign scenario. **JFQ**

Validating the selection of Rostam as a target, Iranian attacks on merchant shipping in that area all but stopped. However, Iran continued laying mines in the Persian Gulf. In April 1988, *USS Samuel B. Roberts* detected three Iranian mines positioned 55 miles off the Qatar Peninsula, backed away, and struck a fourth mine. The 253-pound mine blew a 21-foot hole in the vessel, injuring ten sailors. Despite extensive fire and flooding, the crew controlled the damage and kept the ship afloat. It was towed to Dubai, then to Bath, Maine, for repairs. Within the next ten days, U.S. and allied forces discovered eight more Iranian mines.

Directed by the National Command Authorities to plan and carry out a measured retaliatory response, CINCCENT and the commander of Joint Task Force Middle East conducted Operation Praying Mantis. Three surface

action groups destroyed the Iranian oil platforms at Sasan and Sirri and severely damaged two Iranian frigates and a missile patrol boat. CENTCOM forces, including aircraft from *USS Enterprise*, neutralized four Iranian

Schwarzkopf found that most friendly countries were more concerned with Iran than Iraq

naval vessels in the Mubarak oil field while losing only one helicopter. As the tanker war continued, *USS Vincennes* mistakenly shot down an Iranian airliner, killing all 290 people on board. Finally, under intense international political and economic pressure, Iran and Iraq agreed to a U.N. cease-fire agreement in August 1988.

After assuming command in November 1988, General Norman Schwarzkopf, USA, began to expand diplomatic and military relations with counterparts in the region. During his interview with Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci for the position as

CINCCENT, one concern that the two men discussed was Baghdad's military prowess in the wake of its long war with Iran. But in trips throughout the region Schwarzkopf found that most friendly countries were more concerned with Iran than Iraq. As King Hussein of Jordan informed him, "Don't worry about the Iraqis. They are war weary and have no aggressive intentions toward their Arab brothers."⁹

Spurred by the rapid diminution of Soviet aggressiveness under Gorbachev, Schwarzkopf worked to supplant the CENTCOM primary war plan, which involved combat against the Soviets in Iran, with a more realistic scenario. The original plan, which Crist had described as bankrupt as early as 1986, required five and two-thirds divisions to march from the Arabian Gulf to the Zagros Mountains to prevent Soviet forces from seizing oil fields in Iran. Instead, Schwarzkopf began to plan for what he thought was more likely: Iraq, emerging from eight years of war against Iran with the fourth-largest and most battle-hardened military in the world, moving south to capture oil fields whose output was essential to the industrial world.

Schwarzkopf first tested this new strategy in Internal Look, a command post exercise held in July and early August 1990 at Fort Bragg and Hurlburt and Duke Fields. As the exercise unfolded, he noticed that the real world movements of Iraqi air and ground

forces eerily paralleled the scenario. The fictional exercise messages so closely resembled real intelligence reports that the latter had to be prominently marked *exercise only*. During the last days of Internal Look, the Iraqis captured Kuwait. Suddenly in possession of Kuwaiti oil fields, Iraq was poised to acquire even more valuable prizes on the Arabian peninsula.

For the first time since 1974 an American aircraft carrier sailed into the relatively confined waters of the Persian Gulf. By November 1990,

Schwarzkopf was able to shift to the offensive. Having deterred Iraq from attacking Saudi Arabia, CENTCOM started planning the liberation of Kuwait. Other forces deployed included a heavy division from the United States and Army corps from Germany with support units, three carrier battle groups, a battleship, an amphibious group with a Marine expeditionary brigade, a Marine expeditionary force, and 410 Air Force aircraft.

Backed by the U.N. Security Council, which had passed Resolution 678 on November 29, authorizing coalition forces to use all means necessary to enforce its earlier resolutions calling for Iraqi forces to leave Kuwait, CENTCOM continued to build up a force adequate to the task.

On January 17 at 0300 hours Riyadh time, Operation Desert Storm began with a massive air interdiction strike. Within seven hours planes from Britain, France, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United States flew some 750 sorties. Targets throughout Iraq and Kuwait included military emplacements, air defense assets, and command and control facilities. The air campaign deprived Saddam Hussein of the initiative and prepared the theater for a coalition ground assault that would complete the destruction of Iraqi forces in Kuwait with minimal losses.

Kuwait was liberated on February 27, 1991. With coalition objectives met, a cease-fire was declared for February 28 at 0800 hours, exactly one hundred hours after ground hostilities had commenced. A cease-fire conference was held on March 3 at Safwan where the Iraqis agreed to all coalition demands and allowed their forces to disengage near Basra.

Southern Watch

The fourth CINC was General Joseph Hoar, USMC, who took command in August 1991. He inherited an organization that no longer had to justify its existence. Moreover, having served as CENTCOM chief of staff from 1988 to 1990, he was familiar with its mission. Many operations in the wake of Desert Storm were aimed at Iraqi intransigence. Maritime interdiction, which had begun in August 1990 during the initial stage of Desert Shield,



USS George Washington pulling into port, Southern Watch.

U.S. Navy (Erik Kenney)

enforced U.N. sanctions and were conducted by Australia, Britain, France, and the United States. When the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr opened in July

CENTCOM began Operation Provide Relief to supply aid to Somalia and northeastern Kenya

1993, interception operations were re-instituted in the northern Gulf. By that time, more than 19,150 ships had been challenged and over 8,250 had been boarded and inspected.

Operation Southern Watch, begun in August 1992, was part of the international response to Iraqi noncompliance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 688, which condemned Saddam Hussein's repression of Iraqi civilians, including Iraqi air and ground attacks against insurgents in the southeastern part of the country. CENTCOM established a no-fly zone south of the 32^d parallel to monitor compliance and organized Joint Task Force Southwest Asia to command and control the operation. This approach had already been used in Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds from Iraqi reprisals.

Aside from containing Iraq the most significant challenge that Hoar faced was concern over the east African nation of Somalia. There had been no national government since the departure of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in January 1991, and the country was being racked by clan warfare. To relieve widespread starvation, CENTCOM began Operation Provide Relief in August 1992 to supply aid to Somalia and northeastern Kenya.

UNOSOM II

By late November 1992 it was clear that airlift alone would not suffice. On Thanksgiving Day, President George Bush pledged to send U.S. troops to provide security so that food could reach starving Somalis, dying at the rate of a thousand per day. Operation Restore Hope began in early December in support of U.N. Security Council Resolution 794. A multinational coalition led by CENTCOM and known as Unified Task Force (UNITAF) provided security for transport and distribution centers, ensured security of relief convoys and operations, and assisted humanitarian relief organizations. When the new administration took office in January 1993, UNITAF worked to accomplish its mission and expeditiously turn over control to the United Nations.

UNITAF provided security through May 1993 as the United Nations created UNOSOM II to meet the challenge of mounting peacemaking operations under chapter VII of the U.N. Charter. Meanwhile, the airlift of food and other supplies under Operation Provide Relief continued through February 1993, totaling 2,500 missions flown and 28,000 metric tons delivered.

The staff of UNITAF developed detailed instructions for the turnover to the new organization which led to a seamless transition. In May the UNITAF commander, Lieutenant General Robert Johnston, USMC, turned over operations to the UNOSOM II commander, Lieutenant General Cevik Bir of Turkey. By then, most U.S. forces had been redeployed, although a residual American presence remained to support the U.N. command. It consisted of the UNOSOM II staff members, a logistic support command with 2,800 personnel, and a quick reaction force with 1,200 troops.

Shortly after the United Nations took over relief operations, security in Mogadishu started to deteriorate, even though UNOSOM II operations in the countryside were relatively successful. The militia fighters under Mohamed Farah Aideed were largely responsible for unrest in the capital and increased hostility toward UNOSOM II forces.

Violence erupted once again in September 1993 when the Somalis attacked Nigerian forces. Task Force Ranger conducted several operations in September that captured a few militia leaders. Later in the month, however, three Americans were killed when their helicopter was downed, and further casualties were sustained in the ensuing rescue effort. The most significant combat action occurred in early October, when Task Force Ranger captured six lieutenants of Aideed and several militiamen in a daylight raid. During the withdrawal, Somalis shot down two UH-60 helicopters and brought heavy fire to bear on U.S. soldiers on the ground. In the firefight some 300 Somalis were left dead and hundreds more wounded while 16 Rangers were killed and 83 wounded before the quick reaction force, together with Pakistani and Malaysian soldiers, were able to withdraw to safety. As a result,



Khobar Towers,
Saudi Arabia.

DOO

the President announced that all U.S. troops would be removed from Somalia by the end of March 1994.

Near-Continuous Presence

In August 1994, General Binford Peay, USA, became the fifth CINCCENT and developed an expanded strategy based on maintaining regional access through forward presence, combined exercises, and security assistance programs, assisted by power projection and a readiness to fight. By emphasizing deterrence through coalition building and military-to-military access, this approach promoted stability and protected national interests. The new strategy soon encountered a series of threats from Saddam Hussein, requiring U.S. forces to redeploy to the region.

Terrorist attacks against CENTCOM personnel had lasting effects on command operations. In June 1996, terrorists bombed Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 Americans. Coming after the attack on Saudi Arabian National Guard headquarters in November 1995, which killed seven people, including five Americans, this tragedy resulted in the

relocation of U.S. forces to installations more easily defended against terrorism. Operation Desert Focus began in August 1996 as part of an agreement between Secretary of Defense William Perry and Saudi Minister of Defense and Aviation Prince Khaled bin Sultan. The multinational Joint Task Force Southwest Asia moved operations from Riyadh and Dhahran to al Kharj. In four months, CENTCOM transferred nearly 5,000 people, 78 aircraft, and maintenance facilities to an unfinished area of Prince Sultan air base. In addition to relocating to more secure locations, Desert Focus reduced the footprint of the command by eliminating nonessential billets and returning dependents home, hardened existing facilities, reduced transportation vulnerability, and institutionalized antiterrorism programs.

Perhaps the most innovative contribution that Peay made to CENTCOM and joint thinking was the concept of near-continuous presence. Comprised of Joint Task Force Southwest Asia as well as personnel from every service, including special operations, near-continuous presence promoted stability, deterred aggression, and facilitated peace-to-war transition. The concept exploited core service competencies



The Chairman briefing reporters on Desert Fox.

DOD (Helene C. Sikkell)

and integrated them into a forward-deployed force that provided deterrence and engagement. Having such a presence in its theater—near or otherwise—marked a tremendous advance on the over-the-horizon concept that characterized CENTCOM in earlier years.

Desert Fox

In August 1997, General Anthony Zinni, USMC, became the sixth CINCCENT—the first who had previously served as deputy commander in chief. He had also been deputy commanding general of the combined task force during Operation Provide Comfort immediately following the Persian Gulf War and commander of the combined task force for Operation United Shield. With this experience he was intimately familiar with all aspects of CENTCOM operations, many of which had grown out of Desert Shield/Desert Storm, including Southern Watch and maritime interception.

Rejecting a one-size-fits-all approach Zinni developed strategies specific to each subregion. This included engagement plans that differed between the Arabian Gulf and the Horn of Africa, as well as strategies tailored for South and Central Asia and for Egypt and Jordan. Iraq remained the most pressing near-term threat to U.S.

interests while Iran was potentially the most dangerous in the long term. Weapons of mass destruction and terrorism posed other perils.

Iraq's refusal to comply with U.N. inspections led to coalition preparations for air strikes. In a personal effort to resolve the crisis, Secretary General Kofi Annan traveled to Baghdad. In February 1998, Saddam Hussein promised compliance with the inspection regime. When the agreement unraveled, Operation Desert Thunder was initiated in November. At the direction of the National Command Authorities, CENTCOM deployed forces and postured in-theater assets for strike operations. This highly visible deployment resulted in Iraq's eventual but short-lived compliance with U.N. inspection requirements.

Finally in December 1998, CENTCOM launched Desert Fox, a four-day operation aimed at installations associated with developing weapons of mass destruction, units providing security to such programs, and Iraqi national command and control. Additional targets included Republican Guard facilities, airfields, and the Basrah oil refinery, which was involved in the illegal production of gas and oil exports. Iraq's integrated air defenses and surface-to-air missiles were also struck to protect coalition forces. Baghdad's ability to build and deliver weapons of

mass destruction was set back several years by these strikes.

Since Operation Desert Fox, Joint Task Force Southwest Asia has continued to enforce the southern no-fly zone as EUCOM enforces the northern no-fly zone. By January 2000, Southern Watch forces had flown nearly 240,000 sorties. Another demonstration of the resolve to preserve regional stability is Operation Desert Spring, which secures the commitment of U.S. ground forces and their support facilities to the defense of Kuwait.

From September through November 1999, Zinni orchestrated the large overseas exercise Bright Star '99/'00, begun in 1980. Conducted in Egypt, it involved forces from the host country and Britain, France, Italy, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Eleven participating countries, 33 observer nations, and 70,000 troops took part, which emphasized the interoperability, coalition operations, and computer simulation of exercise events. Both large-scale maneuver operations and a demonstration of CENTCOM amphibious capabilities highlighted this exercise, which underlined regional stability and cultural interaction.

In October 1999, CENTCOM assumed responsibility over five former republics of the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These Central Asian states were integrated into the overall collective engagement of the command. According to this strategy, "an ounce of proactive engagement protection is cheaper than a pound of warfighting cure." As a military diplomat, Zinni was directly involved in efforts to defuse long-standing conflicts between countries in his area of responsibility before they led to all-out war. As a result, with over 20 years of evolutionary progress and active engagement in the Central Region, first as RDJTF and then as CENTCOM, the command enters the new century with a proven track record of accomplishment and a proud heritage of achievement.

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